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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2077
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1588
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1462
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 3810
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5269
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 1252
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SINGAPORE 000554

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SUBJECT: EAP DAS JOHN'S VISIT TO SINGAPORE

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Classified By: EP Counselor Laurent Charbonnet, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

11. (C) Summary: EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary Eric John briefed GOS interlocutors on U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia and the resumption of military ties with the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) during his February 8-11 visit. Ministry of Defence Permanent Secretary Chiang Chie Foo said President Yudhoyono, his Ministry of Defense, and TNI were slowly working to place the TNI under civilian control. Indonesia was the key strategic player in Southeast Asia and Singapore could not afford instability there, he argued. DAS John and MFA Second Permanent Secretary Bilahari had a full and frank exchange of views on China's and the United States' level and quality of involvement with Southeast Asia. Singapore's security agencies told DAS John they believed Indonesia was stepping up its counterterrorism efforts, but was still the main source of terrorist threat to Singapore. They argued, however, that the Philippines, with its poor governance, constituted a more serious terrorist threat for the region at large. End Summary.

12. (U) Visiting Singapore February 8-11, EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary Eric John met with Ministry of Defence Permanent

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Secretary Chiang Chie Foo, MFA Second Permanent Secretary

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Bilahari Kausikan, Internal Security Department (ISD) Director Pang Kin Keong, Security and Intelligence Division (SID) Director BG Chee Wee Kiong, and the American Chamber of Commerce. He also conducted a roundtable discussion with researchers at the Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies, a government-linked think tank. DAS John's meeting with Foreign Minister George Yeo is reported reftel.

Indonesia and TNI Reform

13. (C) EAP DAS John briefed Ministry of Defence Permanent Secretary Chiang on U.S. policy toward Indonesia and the

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resumption of military ties with the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI). Chiang said Singapore had considerable interaction with the TNI and welcomed the decision by the United States to rebuild its links with the Indonesian military. As an institution, the TNI could hold the country together, just as

former President Suharto used it to keep Indonesia in one piece, Chiang argued. Asked about efforts to place the TNI under the civilian control of the Ministry of Defense, Chiang said it would not be easy to do. The TNI had its own clout, but President Yudhoyono, the Ministry, and TNI were working slowly to resolve this. Chiang noted that the TNI had played a positive role in the Aceh peace process by "restraining the actions" of its local units. Due to strong nationalist sentiments, it would be difficult to make progress with the TNI if the discussions were public. The TNI could not afford to be seen as pro-West or pro-Singapore. DAS John commented that we wanted to work quietly with the TNI, but members of Congress wanted more public statements.

¶4. (C) The GOS viewed Indonesia as the key strategic player in Southeast Asia, according to Chiang. For the region to move forward, Indonesia had to be a part of the effort. Singapore could not afford instability or anarchy in such an important neighbor. If the provinces broke away from the central government, Singapore would have to contend with many more power centers. Chiang cautioned that the United States should be patient with its push for Indonesia's democratization. Opening up a political system too quickly can lead to unintended consequences, such as Hamas' victory in the Palestinian Territories, he asserted.

Amb. Chan's Speech and U.S. Engagement

¶5. (C) DAS John told MFA Second Permanent Secretary Bilahari that Ambassador Chan Heng Chee's February 3 speech in Houston on China and ASEAN had stirred a negative reaction in Washington. (Note: Amb. Chan is Singapore's ambassador to the United States. End Note.) The speech was inaccurate and portrayed U.S. involvement with ASEAN in a negative light. If Singapore had concerns about our policy toward Southeast Asia, the GOS should raise them with us directly, DAS John said. The normally loquacious Bilahari was momentarily stunned and finally admitted that he had not read the speech

SINGAPORE 00000554 002 OF 003

and couldn't comment on it directly but he took DAS John's point. Neither the Americas Directorate Director nor the North American Affairs Deputy Director, who were also in the meeting, had apparently read or even seen the speech.

¶6. (C) Bilahari went on to argue that the United States was falling behind China's multilateral diplomacy with ASEAN. He acknowledged the intrinsic structural restraints limiting the United States' ability to engage multilaterally -- the United States was "always ambivalent" about regional diplomacy and, as a global power, had limited time to devote to each region. China had been engaged in a concerted effort over the last decade to improve its ties with Southeast Asia. China had been "spinning a web" with various meetings, forums, and agreements. While many of these were "meaningless" in and of themselves, they took on a different meaning in their totality. China's goal was not to displace the United States from Southeast Asia -- which it couldn't do -- but to shift it aside. A number of countries in Southeast Asia, in addition to Burma and Laos, were calculating their national interests with China in mind, asserted Bilahari.

¶7. (C) DAS John stated that the United States was interested in quality agreements with ASEAN that had substance. The ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership would enable us to expand our economic and political engagement. He added that there would also be significant "visit diplomacy" this year, with the President's trip to Hanoi in November for APEC and several trips to the region by the Secretary. Our goal was not to compete with China for influence, but to maintain a high quality of involvement. Bilahari responded that Singapore welcomed a positive competition for influence in the region. An "imbalance of influence would cramp our style."

18. (C) The Indonesian security forces had become more serious about the terrorist threat, due to pressure from President Yudhoyono and other countries as well as inter-service rivalry, observed SID Director BG Chee. Inter-agency coordination, however, remained a weak link in Indonesia's counterterrorism (CT) efforts. Indonesia's legal framework was also poor. Given President Yudhoyono's concerns about maintaining his popular support, some Muslim groups had been able to slow down attempts to strengthen Indonesia's CT laws.

BG Chee commented favorably on Vice President Kalla's efforts to encourage moderate Muslim clerics in Indonesia to get together and speak out against extremists and terrorism. This was a more sophisticated strategy by the GOI to isolate religious extremists and it seemed to enjoy high public support.

19. (C) The terrorist threat remained very real in Indonesia, cautioned BG Chee. The Jemaah Islamiya (JI) network in Indonesia had "morphed" and had changed its operational style. Instead of mass attacks that killed too many Muslims, JI had turned to more targeted suicide bombings. ISD Director Pang Kin Keong said the GOS was watching the development of other militant groups in Indonesia, some of which shared a similar ideology with JI but hadn't attacked any international targets yet. Some of these groups had provided assistance to JI, he claimed. Terrorists continued to use the Sulawesi Sea area to move people and goods between southern Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, BG Chee said. The GOS hoped to get a better understanding on what was happening in this area. Stemming the terrorist traffic would be difficult due to official corruption, the ease of evading immigration controls, and geography.

110. (C) In the Philippines, the main obstacle to CT efforts was poor governance, commented BG Chee. The GOS had found people it could work with in the Philippine military and security agencies, but the political situation in the country didn't allow more systematic progress. Given its size and proximity, Indonesia was Singapore's primary concern for terrorism. For Southeast Asia in general, however, the Philippines was a bigger problem, concluded BG Chee. The government there was not pursuing terrorist groups as aggressively as it should.

111. (C) The violence in southern Thailand was due to historical separatist grievances, argued BG Chee. While

SINGAPORE 00000554 003 OF 003

there were no signs of foreign involvement or religious ideology behind the violence, that could change, he warned. Foreigners could join the fight with their own ideology; many of the separatist leaders had religious backgrounds and could become more sympathetic to the global jihadist movement. Separatists hadn't shifted their attacks to foreign targets, attacked outside the south, or used suicide bombers -- all key indicators that hadn't been "breached" yet, noted BG Chee.

112. (C) The Malaysian security agencies had a good grasp on the terrorist threat, commented BG Chee. He cautioned, however, that Islamic issues were more sensitive and politicized in Malaysia than Indonesia. Both the ruling UMNO and opposition PAS parties had put religious issues "front and center."

CT in Singapore

113. (C) ISD Director Pang told DAS John that he didn't deny that some of "our own Muslims" in Singapore might be "sympathetic" and "susceptible to terrorist ideology." The GOS was confronting the terrorist threat on two fronts. First, the GOS used a "low threshold" to take action. If an individual embraced an extremist ideology, Pang said, "I will

bring him in and evaluate him." Instead of focusing on just terrorist group members, the GOS would "go upstream" to identify potential terrorist recruits and take action. Second, the GOS had an active community education program to encourage Muslim religious leaders to preach a moderate ideology and say why the extremists were wrong. In the end, to succeed, it would be necessary to "make the ideology die."

¶14. (U) DAS John has cleared this message.
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